

Communication must strengthen civil society

Eveline Herfkens

'Communication: from confrontation to reconciliation': that is the title of this conference. Lack of communication can indeed breed misunderstanding and exclusion, sometimes with violent results. But this doesn't mean that communication is a kind of miracle cure that automatically leads from confrontation to reconciliation; a magic formula that opens the door to a world without poverty or violence. That is the question we are concerned with here: can better information channels aid reconciliation - and thereby help reduce poverty and violence? And I would like to set the ball rolling.

The first thing I want to make clear is that I have nothing against confrontation or conflict as such. Fashionable as it is, I'm not so keen on the term 'conflict prevention'. It is not confrontation we need to avoid, but violence. Clashes between conflicting interests are perfectly normal - even in stable states. The newspapers are full of them every day - and it would be a very dull world without them. The challenge for society is to deal with conflict constructively, to ensure that the minorities accept democratic decisions - decisions made in parliament and not on the battlefield.

That is asking a lot of a society's institutions. But it does not mean that they have to be carbon copies of Western institutions. Each country should be able to choose the kind of governance and decision-making structures that best suit its own social and religious traditions. But it is essential that members of society are able to participate, that their voices can be heard, that decisions are not made over their heads, and that they are fully informed about issues that concern them. Press freedom, freedom of expression and open access to the media and other sources of information are, therefore, of crucial importance.

Lobbying for freedom of expression

Dutch development co-operation contributes to all this in many ways. We lobby for freedom of expression everywhere through the United Nations and a host of other international organisations. We help improve the quality of the media in developing countries by training journalists and managers. We encourage the development of independent media by, for example, supporting trade unions. In these efforts we focus on media which give a voice to the poor.

But this does not automatically lead to reconciliation. The emphasis is on openness and participation. Information can encourage people to protest against injustice which they may otherwise have been unaware of. Journalists who expose corrupt practices often find their lives under threat. Those in power do not always like to be watched too closely. But confrontation is necessary to combat such abuses, which only exacerbate poverty. In short, a period of confrontation might be necessary before reconciliation is possible. The fight against poverty is not always easy, and development is by definition accompanied by conflict.

This brings me to my second point. I have nothing against conflict, but I have a horror of violence. Once societies become caught up in a whirlpool of hate and violence, communication too takes on a different guise. Warring parties also communicate. But the information they provide is often aimed at reinforcing the other's image as 'the enemy'. This murderous spiral of mistrust and disinformation must be broken to give peace a chance. A peace process rarely begins when the politicians meet at the negotiating table. That is usually the end. The first moves are often made by individuals who take the initiative to approach the opposing party. An active civil society is of inestimable value - and for that civil society, communication is essential.

A recent example of Dutch support for communication projects to strengthen civil society in countries affected by war is Radio Voice of Hope in Sudan, a radio station set up by the Sudanese Council of Churches. It has been broadcasting to millions of displaced persons from South Sudan since December 2000, and helps them to contact their families and let them know that they are still alive.

Sudan, has been suffering from the effects of war on and off since 1955. The conflict is very complex. Its people are fighting about state and religion, unity and autonomy, and how to distribute the country's wealth. In past years, there have been repeated attempts to reconcile all these differences. Many of these initiatives are aimed at the leaders of political parties and other members of the elite. Yet it has proved difficult to make progress in this way. Solutions to such complex conflicts require more than just negotiations between leaders. Mistrust has been fed and strengthened at all levels for decades. Confidence must therefore be restored at all levels.

The preamble to the 1945 UNESCO Constitution, which is also referred to in the conference reader, says it all: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'. Civil society has a crucial part to play in the search for peace. And civil society needs good communications. Radio Voice of Hope is one such channel of information,

Every little helps

I would like to give you one more example of an initiative aimed at enhancing communication and thus mutual understanding between ethnic and religious groups within a country. Since 1997, the Netherlands has contributed around three million guilders to an educational television programme for children in Macedonia. The series' producers include the makers of Sesame Street. The programme is about a group of children who live in an apartment complex. Unlike in real life in Macedonia, families from different ethnic and religious backgrounds - Slavs, Muslims, Albanians and Turks - live in the complex. The children see each other every day, and this allows a wide range of prejudices and cultural misunderstandings to be addressed. They each speak their own language. The programme is broadcast by all language-group stations (Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish), with subtitles where necessary. In this way, children become acquainted with other languages, while many parents watch too so that they can read the subtitles to the younger children. The series is very popular. The little actors and actresses have become stars and the theme tune has been brought out on a CD. It has its own video clip and has become a massive hit.

As you know the tension in Macedonia has soared in recent months, fuelling fears of another war in the Balkans. A children's television programme can do little to change that. I have no illusions about that. But every little helps, and may stop the scales from tipping towards violence and war. The same applies to the activities of organisations like yours. Support for communication aimed at reconciliation can make the difference.

I have given you examples from radio and television. But you can also achieve a lot using the Internet, and you don't need that much money or manpower to do so. After it was closed down, the critical Yugoslavian radio station B92 kept contact with its listeners over the Internet. The Indonesian student protests in 1998 were partly organised via the Internet. And for discriminated groups, such as homosexuals in many African countries, the Internet can be of great importance. This can be seen, for example, in the case of the Gay and Lesbian Community in Zimbabwe, which is supported by HIVOS.

In conclusion, I would like to say something about the increasing confrontations that globalisation has sparked in the past two years. From Seattle to Gothenburg, meetings of the WTO, the World Bank and now the European Union, have been the scene of street protests, of violent confrontation. The anti-globalisation movement is an alliance of sometimes unlikely bedfellows, who communicate largely over the Internet. They are united around the idea that globalisation is bad for people and for the environment - and that multilateral institutions are just making things worse.

In my opinion, this is a skewed view of reality. You can't stop globalisation. But you can steer it to create greater opportunities for poverty reduction. And you can't do that without those international institutions. Poor countries benefit from rules-based systems in which the rules are drawn up to their advantage. The international financial institutions are rules-based systems that can provide legal certainty for the weak, where otherwise the law of the jungle would prevail. We must strengthen these institutions, not weaken them, and ensure that they give more priority to poverty reduction. Fortunately, I see them moving in that direction, although the message has not yet got through completely. Perhaps governments and international organisations have a

communication problem.

I know the WACC's members are also concerned with globalisation. I am therefore very interested in your conclusions and your recommendations on how communication can help achieve reconciliation in this area. I wish you a very fruitful conference.